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SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: BARBARIANS, BAD SHOWS, BIG BROTHER, AND BAHWAN

1. Summary: The Omani Internet message board "al-Sablah" is the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language forum for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, this popular site nevertheless offers a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

- Al-Zarqawi's Statement To Al-Jazeera
- Oman's National Day Celebrations
- Al-Sablah Surveillance
- Expatriate Supervisors

End summary.

A Terrorist Loses Support

2. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's statement to al-Jazeera regarding his intentions to kill "Israelis rather than Jordanians" in the November 9 Amman hotel bombings created a stir among al-Sablah members, many of whom previously had supported acts of "resistance" against U.S. and Western military forces in Iraq. Out of 645 hits and 29 responses, fully 90% blasted the terrorist leader and his tactics. "He is a liar and a criminal," wrote one member. Another continued, "I swear, this terrorist is a liar and a hypocrite. His hands are polluted with the blood of innocents, much more so than the American invaders." Other responses were sharper: "Go to hell, you coward barbarian. Go to the dustbin of history."

3. One participant suggested, "Al-Zarqawi and other members of al-Qaeda are used as scapegoats for every terrorist act in the region, and the media go along with this." This suggestion was quickly shouted down: "The victims of the bombings were most Jordanian wedding guests, not Israelis. Does al-Zarqawi think we are so nave to believe what he says? Can he bring back the innocent lives he took, simply by saying, 'Sorry, I didn't mean it'?"

The Show Must Go On

4. One element of Oman's National Day celebrations, marking the thirty-fifth anniversary of Sultan Qaboos' accession to the throne, prompted a mix of emotions among al-Sablah readers. Commenting on a student festival that was held at a Muscat stadium on November 20, more than 200 message board visitors complained about the poor quality of the performance. "How could the Ministry of Education present the Sultan with such a bad show?" wondered one participant. Others appeared angered by this particular part of the festival: "This was really a disappointment. What we saw in the 1970's and 1980's was even better than this, and that time we were working with much more limited budgets."

5. The majority of complaints focused on the "foreign" feel of the student parade, pointing out that the trainer hailed from Egypt. "There was nothing in the show that portrayed Omani traditions or values. There were only Egyptian voices and music." Widespread among al-Sablah members was the belief that "the large amounts of money earmarked for this festival must have found their way into somebody's pocket, rather than being put towards the actual performances."

6. A November 21 military parade, on the other hand, generated 150 positive responses out of 2,172 viewers. "It was an excellent performance where all the police and military forces showed a high degree of discipline and superior preparation," reported one observer. "And this is not surprising," continued another, "because the military parade was the result of purely Omani organizers and trainers, down to the last musical note." Kudos also poured in for the first public performance by the all-female Royal Oman Police band in another event, the tattoo: "We are proud of these sixty policewomen, who played their instruments fabulously and exceeded all our expectations," exclaimed an enthusiast.

17. Although dormant for many months, the allegation that Omani security forces regularly monitor the al-Sablah message board resurfaced when one participant noticed that "a lot of active members have recently disappeared mysteriously from the chatroom." Another writer commented, "The contributor known as 'Thoughtful Voice' was an active member, until one day he posted that he had been summoned by investigators. He then decided to leave the forum after giving his farewell message." Others praised the openness of the message board, noting that "this place has hosted many sectors of the Omani intelligentsia, such as journalists, freelance writers, and even officials using pseudonyms." On balance, roughly half of the 37 respondents felt that the message board was being monitored by the internal security services, while the other half felt free to post whatever they wanted.

Excoriating The Expats

18. A woman's plea for help to prominent Omani businessman Saud Bahwan on the Internet message board turned into an argument regarding expatriate Indian employees in the Sultanate. The woman, an employee of one of Bahwan's companies, was allegedly prevented from moving to a different wilayat (province) by her supervisor, an Indian national. More than 7,000 al-Sablah members viewed the topic, and many of the 133 respondents fired off missives such as "Indian supervisors always complain about Omani absenteeism, laziness, and carelessness," and "Indian supervisors constantly give poor evaluations to their Omani employees, even though investigations have proved these Omanis were model workers."

19. Bahwan, a well-known philanthropist, was himself alternately criticized and defended by forum members. "Saud Bahwan is one of the more decent and respected figures in Oman. He is renowned for his willingness to help anybody who knocks at his door," volunteered one writer. But another noted, "Bahwan should hire more Omanis and fewer Indians in his companies. Sure, he does a lot of charity work, but his hiring policies hurt a lot of Omani families economically."

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